

The Old Time Gospel

The Good News Now

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Dry Bones

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Reviving Dry Bones

More than 160,000 people a year frequent a tourist attraction in Paris – the catacombs. Once used as tunnels for stone mines, it now houses the bones of 6 million in a network of passages 190 miles long. These networks became burial chambers when Paris’ cemeteries became overcrowded and unsanitary in the 18th century, requiring old bones to be dug up and stored in the underground cavern. During the French Revolution, a hospital worker decided to explore the tunnels on his own. His skeleton was found 11 years later. Today, only one mile of catacombs is open to the public and an intercom system has recently been installed to ensure no more visitors get lost and become dry bones.

We want to talk about dry bones this morning. It’s found in Ezek. 37:1-14. Most people associate the book of Ezekiel with one of two things: God’s chariot with the “wheel in the middle of a wheel,” or the dry bones that come back to life. Both of these visions have inspired several lively songs, but rarely are they the subject of practical or serious Bible study. We want to focus on this vision and see what we can learn. (Read)

Ezekiel was a Hebrew from the tribe of Levi who was captured by Nebuchadnezzar and carried away to Babylon. He prophesied between the years 600 and 570 BC and was a contemporary of the prophet Daniel. Some scholars believe that his reference in the very first verse of the book to “the 30th year” was probably an indication of his age. If so, that means Ezekiel would have been only 25 years old at the time he was forced to leave his homeland. Thirty was also the age when a priest could begin to minister (Numbers 4:3). It was at age 30 that Jesus began His ministry, Joseph began to rule over Egypt, and David began his reign.

This fascinating prophecy of dry bones has something for every body. First of all, he was speaking primarily to his fellow captives among the children of Israel. The 10 tribes had been so widely scattered among the surrounding nations that they seemed all but lost as a people. It looked as if their national identity was forever gone and they would never again return to their promised land. Hence, one purpose of this vision was to inspire them with hope that God would someday revive them as a nation.

In addition, this prophecy speaks about what God will do for spiritual Israel, which is the church today. An obvious theme of the vision is that God can resurrect dry bones – that He can give literal life to that which is dead and inanimate. It is a message that He can revive His people and turn them into a mighty army.

Last of all, it speaks to us individually. No matter how dried up and worthless we may feel, or how dead in trespasses and sins, God can restore us to life through His Word and Spirit.

Picture the scene, Ezekiel was carried off in the Spirit and taken to an obscure valley. The Promised Land is home to the lowest spot on earth. Located down below the Jordan Valley, near the Dead Sea, this valley is more than 1,300 feet below sea level. Everywhere, on every side, were dead men’s bleached bones. Talk about Death Valley!

Now keep in mind that when an army was defeated in battle in Bible times, the victorious soldiers would strip the valuables from the slain and then leave their enemies' bodies unburied. In remote places where there had been serious battles, skeletons sometimes remained for years afterward, until the beasts of carrion completely scattered the bones or they surrendered to the elements. Ezekiel lived at a time when one could find literal valleys of bones – where the slain had been overwhelmed and there was no one to bury them.

This image also has a lot of relevance for us. The Bible tells us that just after the Lord comes, the surface of the earth will remain convoluted and destroyed for 1,000 years. The earth will look like a wilderness strewn with the corpses of the lost. Nobody will be there to lament, to mourn, or to bury the dead. “And the slain of the Lord shall be at that day from one end of the earth even unto the other end of the earth,” says Jeremiah 25:33. This entire world is going to be a dark valley of dry bones that will someday come to life for judgment.

Ezekiel was not only a prophet of God, he was also a priest. The poor guy was placed in the midst of this valley of bones, and he said that the Lord “caused me to pass by them” (verse 2). Can you imagine walking around ankle deep in the bones of dead men? It might have been a dog's dream come true, but it likely made the prophet extremely uncomfortable. To touch a dead body would render anybody, but especially a priest, unclean. The Bible says these bones were “very dry.” There wasn't any hope of life.

While excavating an ancient peat bog in England, archaeologists found some very small seeds. They estimated that the seeds had been there for thousands of years, yet when planted, they sprouted lilies! This particular species was believed to be extinct, yet because life was somehow preserved in that seed, the flower lived again.

However, you can't stick a dry bone in water and expect it to come back to life. So these “very dry” bones symbolized a situation that looked completely hopeless.

This theme means a lot for us as individuals, because these dry bones represent people. The Bible says, “He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life” (1John 5:12) If you don't have Jesus, your bones are bleached dry. Spiritually speaking, you have no life.

Just as water brings the parched earth to life, God's Word and living water of His Spirit will bring dry souls new life. Isaiah 44:3 says, “For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring.”

Ephesians 2:1 says, “And you hath He quickened (revived), who were dead in trespasses and sins.” If sin still reigns in our lives, if we're still controlled by a life of sin, then we're spiritually dead. We are as good as dry bones. Thankfully, the hope in this story is that God can revive dry bones.

And so God asked Ezekiel a question. He said, “Son of man, can these bones live?” Ezekiel replied, “O Lord God, thou knowest.” Just as the ancient philosopher Socrates used to teach by asking questions, so too God asks people questions to arouse their thought process and get them to analyze the situation. “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord” (Isaiah 1:18).

If Ezekiel had responded to God's question based on the evidence of his senses, he would have answered “no.” Dead, dry bones cannot come back to life. If you were the first to the scene of an accident and you saw somebody lying motionless on the ground, you might think there is hope, and apply CPR. But if you saw a skeleton lying in the road, you wouldn't even consider giving it mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. You'd think, “It's just dead bones. There's no hope.”

What God wants us to learn from this story is that nothing is too hard for Him. What may appear hopeless and dead to you is a field full of possibilities for the Lord. When Mary asked, "How can this be?" the angel Gabriel told her, "Nothing is impossible with God." And when the disciples asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus answered, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible."

The Bible is saying that without Christ, we can't do anything, but through Christ all things are possible. God never wants us to lose faith that He can give life – even if it appears that a situation is hopeless. We have all heard the proverb where there is life there is hope (Eccl. 9:4). Yet with God, there is even hope when there appears to be no life.

Next, God tells Ezekiel, "Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord." Preaching to dry bones would seem like a waste of time. A skeleton just isn't listening! But we sometimes forget the incredible vital power of God's Word. If God can speak matter into existence with just a word and if He can make a man out of clay or a woman out of a rib, then He can cause the spiritually dead to hear. God's Word is so potent and so powerful that it infuses new life into that which appears dead.

Whenever the Lord speaks, things happen. The Bible tells us that when Christ said to the leper, "Be cleansed," he was immediately clean (Mark 1:40-42). When Jesus said, "Get up and walk," to a man who had not walked in 38 years, the man walked (John 5:5-9). There is always inherent power in the Word of God to enable us to do whatever He commands.

In Ezekiel 37:5, God says, "Behold I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live." Bones are almost always associated with death, yet Scripture tells one story in which bones were a source of life. In 2Kings 13:20, 21, we find that Elisha the prophet, who was filled with a double portion of Elijah's spirit, was so Spirit-filled that his bones radiated life even after he was dead.

The Bible says that after Elisha died and was buried, some men in Israel were performing a funeral ceremony for one of their friends. As they were carrying his remains out to bury him, they caught a glimpse of Moabite raiders on horseback. These land pirates had been ransacking the countryside, and the Israelite men knew that they needed to get out of there fast or they'd be the next victims. They didn't want to be disrespectful toward the friend they were burying, but they had to run for their lives. So the Bible says that "they cast the man into the sepulcher of Elisha: and when the man was let down, and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood up on his feet."

There are also many modern-day examples of how bones can give life. In its June 1997 issue, Reader's Digest told about a family in which the daughter contracted a form of leukemia that would ultimately kill her unless she received a bone marrow transplant. Because she had an unusual blood type, it was very difficult to find a donor. So her parents did something that was almost unbelievable. They began praying to have another child with the same rare blood type. They hoped this second child, after a short time, would be able to provide the bone marrow needed for their daughter with leukemia.

Things were somewhat complicated by the fact that this was an older couple and the man had already had a vasectomy. Not only would doctors need to reverse that, which is a very iffy procedure in itself, but their new baby would need to have the same rare blood type as the older sister.

It worked. The man's surgery was a success, the couple was able to conceive again, and they gave birth to a second daughter who had the appropriate blood type. After 14 months, the little girl provided enough bone marrow, from her hip, to give a transplant that saved her older sister's life. There is life in the bones.

Ezekiel 37:7 says, “So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone.”

When God’s people preach the truth, it’s going to cause a rattling. Things are going to happen. Sometimes it brings revival. At other times it arouses opposition or persecution. Sometimes both! But when the truth is faithfully proclaimed, there’s going to be a lot of shaking.

Imagine the prophet standing in this valley, ankle-deep in thousands of sun-bleached skeletons. Then as Ezekiel began to preach, there was a rattling. Suddenly as if drawn by some powerful unseen magnet, bones began to whiz and fly through the air, being pulled back to their original partners as God began the amazing process of reassembly.

After the bones came together in their appropriate positions and Ezekiel continued preaching, the Bible says that sinew and tendons began to take their places. Next the skin was put in position. Notice that God was doing things in order. God always works through process and does things in their proper order – whether it is rebuilding His church or reviving us individually. “Let all things be done decently and in order” 1Cor. 14:40.

Peter tells us that growing in Christ is also a process with order. “Add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity” 2Peter 1:5-7.

So the body parts were all in their proper place. The bones, muscle and skin were in position, but still there was no life. The brain was in the head, but it wasn’t thinking. The lungs were there, but the body wasn’t breathing. The heart was in place, but it wasn’t beating. Like Adam before the Lord inflated him with the breath of life, each soldier was a perfect lifeless corpse.

Now Ezekiel is surrounded not with thousands of disconnected bones, but with an army of cold bodies. This condition describes some churches. They might have everything in place, but there is no spiritual life. Jesus says of them: “I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead” Rev. 3:1. Outwardly, the members look really good. They think they’re rich and increased with goods and in need of nothing, yet they don’t have the breath of life. (vs. 17)

Ezekiel 37:10 says, “So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army.”

God gives them life to fight. They become an army. In the same way, God gives us spiritual life so we can become soldiers in His army. We come to the Lord, He breathes into us the breath of life, then we go for the Lord. Zechariah 4:6 describes the battle plan: “Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.”

After World War II, tens of thousands of Japanese soldiers and civilians were killed in Saipan. And today, 60 years later, teams of volunteers are still combing the region, searching for the bones of individuals who disappeared. It’s very important for the survivors to be able to identify their missing relatives. Thus far they have found less than half of the people. That would be a very depressing job, don’t you think? How much better to be involved in bringing life to bones that really can live – to people who can experience new life by virtue of the Word of God and the Spirit of God.

In verse 11, God says to Ezekiel “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts.” Have you ever felt cut off, dried up, or even hopeless?

This story in Ezekiel is a vision of hope. It's a wonderful message that God's Word and His Spirit can bring life to any situation and to any soul – no matter how utterly dead and hopeless it might be.

Perhaps you remember the story where the dry, dead rod of Aaron came to life. After being placed in the ark of God overnight, it budded, flowered, and produced almonds (Numbers 17:8). If God can make an old stick fruitful in His presence, He can do the same for us.

As a church, God can revive us and make us an army that will be part of His end-time remnant. This story in Ezekiel tells us that God's people will be raised up and brought into the Promised Land. There will be a resurrection of the righteous someday soon, and we will ultimately live in that new earth in the New Jerusalem. But even before that, the Lord wants to raise up an army of Spirit-filled people who will expand His kingdom.

Are you ready to enlist?